

Book Review

Orchids of southern Africa

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Certain groups of the South African flora have attracted more attention than others. The orchids are certainly one such group, even though (as yet) they are of little economical importance compared to species from tropical America, Asia, or Australia. The group has been served well by published accounts, including those by Bolus (1888, 1893–1913, 1918), Schelpe (1966), Harrison (1972), Ball (1978) and Stewart *et al.* (1982). Their cultivation is elucidated by Wodrich (1997). Serious taxonomic monographs include those by Hall (1965) on *Eulophia*, Hall (1982) on *Satyrium* and along list of publications by HP Linder and his co-workers on every conceivable aspect of the tribe Disiinae. Several groups have been documented on a continental basis in recent times, amongst others *Aerangis* by Stewart (1979), *Microcoelia* by Jonsson (1981), the *Bulbophyllinae* by Vermeulen (1987), *Stenoglottis* by Stewart (1989), *Nervilia* by Pettersson (1991) and various genera by Summerhayes in a series of 30 papers published between 1927 and 1966. We are even able to view our orchids in perspective as a result of accounts of the orchid floras of neighbouring and near-neighbouring regions (Stewart and Campbell 1970, 1996, Williamson 1977, La Croix *et al.* 1983, 1991) and just recently the account of the Orchidaceae for the *Flora zambesiaca* region appeared (La Croix and Cribb 1995, 1998). The prospective buyers of this new book thus have reason to ask whether yet another book is necessary.

The answer has to be 'yes'. At present not a single book on all the orchids of South Africa is available, all having been sold out. The obvious course would have been to update and reprint Stewart *et al.*'s (1982) book, but the authors state in their *Preface* (p. ix) that they do not consider that a viable option; firstly because of a considerable number of name changes (not a good reason), secondly because a number of taxonomic concepts on both generic and specific level have changed and thirdly because of newly discovered or recorded species, so that more than a hundred new names appear in this book. In a way the new book is an update of the previous one, but by only one of the original authors, some new photographs, some expanded text, and a new publisher.

A quick look at the table of *Contents* reveals that there are

chapters covering virtually all questions likely to be asked by readers. Amongst others there are chapters on the physiognomy of the region (geography, geology and soil, climate, and vegetation), on the orchid flora, biology, classification, history of regional orchidology, protection, economic uses, and cultivation and there is a glossary and bibliography. There are two different indexes, which could have been combined for ease of use. However, the major part of the book comprises species accounts.

Of necessity the text is very brief and to the point, in order to present all this information in an already big book. In fact, the ancillary chapters are so brief as to be almost useless—for example, those on *Economic uses* and on *Cultivation*. Exceptions are the *Glossary* and *References*, both of which look pretty comprehensive to me.

The main part of the book, the treatments of individual species, is also quite terse. Compared to *Wild orchids of southern Africa* (Stewart *et al.* 1982), this book additionally lists the essential literature, synonymy, type specimens and their location, one or two voucher specimens and the descriptions are more comprehensive though still brief. There are keys to the identification of all genera and species, and also some cladograms.

Virtually every species dealt with, is illustrated either with a colour photo or line drawing to which there are references after the species descriptions. In some instances, like *Disa zuluensis* which was illustrated with a colour photograph in *Wild orchids*, the new book has no illustration at all. The colour photos are arranged together, a few on a page, back to back, so of necessity they seldom face the relevant text. I must confess that I like the excellent line drawings, presumably by Prof Linder's wife Claire Smith ('CES'), better than the colour photographs: the photos have no scale of magnification so that the non-initiated loses his sense of scale and because the photos were collected from diverse sources, they do not always illustrate the salient features of the particular species.

For every species there is a distribution map, a real boon except that it strictly covers the *Flora of southern Africa* area, so that the adjacent parts of Zimbabwe and Mozambique are presented with a blank space even though those regions may be the main distribution areas of some species. In

cases like *Ansellia africana* this creates the false impression that the distribution is disjunct.

The book is printed on very nice paper, neither too glossy nor too dull and not too thin. It is in a format close to A4, which I like because it fits neatly into the bookshelf together with such immortal masterpieces as Marloth's *Flora of South Africa*, White and Sloane's *The Stapelieae*; White, Dyer and Sloane's *The succulent Euphorbieae*, Reynolds' *Aloes of South Africa* and *The aloes of tropical Africa and Madagascar*, Letty's *Wildflowers of the Transvaal*, and Palmer and Pitman's *Trees of southern Africa*. Like Balkema's previous products, it is sturdily bound in cloth, albeit in a regal purple colour which may not appeal to all and which is echoed on the spine and back of the pictorial dust jacket.

When assessing a book like this, one has to ask for whom it has been intended. The results of plant taxonomical work look so deceptively simple that amateurs mostly have no difficulty in accessing it, which is one of the reasons why botany, almost alone amongst the sciences, has such a large amateur following. Nevertheless, because of this following, the scientist can do worse than presenting his results in a form appealing to the widest possible audience. This is indeed possible without lowering the scientific standard, as was so elegantly demonstrated by Reynolds in his monographs on *Aloe*. Apart from the ancillary chapters, the text of this book really looks very similar to the format of the sluggishly appearing *Flora of southern Africa*. The latter was conceived as a concise inventory of our flora and as such every new volume is eagerly welcomed by every botanically minded South African, whether professional or amateur. The new work offers all that the *Flora* does and more. However, there is a difference, the new book is not sold through scientific institutions, but over the counters of commercial booksellers. For such a book to be a commercial success it must be able to stir up interest in the widest possible circle of readers. I am afraid that this is where this book fails. The information is all there, even if in skeletal/compressed form, but I find the style of writing as well as the design of the book to be very dull. It would have been so easy to liven up the subject matter by inserting here and there something about history, pollination, unusual habitat preference or occurrence elsewhere in Africa. Instead of monotonously repeating photos of flowers, a few nice and ecologically informative photos of plants against habitat background would have done so much more for the appeal of the book — here I refer to Plates 11, 15, 16, 18, 19, 50, 53, and 57 of which more could have been scattered through the book. As for lay-out, I need only refer to Dransfield and Beentje's *Palms of Madagascar* (reviewed in *South African Journal of Botany* 63: 165–177 (1997)), a similar floristic account which had the potential for a valuable but dull book, but was saved by wonderfully inspired lay-out.

Lastly, I am sorely tempted to complain about the price, which places it beyond the means of so many young enthusiasts (as well as not a few who have devoted a lifetime to botany). Yet I have to concede that it provides good value for

money. Every known species in the region, 466 in all, is described in recognisable detail, almost each one is illustrated with an image (96 pages in colour and 82 figures of line drawings) and a distribution map, there are chapters on every conceivable aspect of orchidology, and there is a comprehensive bibliography. The way the information is presented will ensure that it remains a standard reference work for many years to come.

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